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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 005904

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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: TRANSFORMATIONAL DIPLOMACY IN THE EP:
OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND

REF: A. RIYADH 5136
[B. RIYADH 3315](#)
[C. RIYADH 3312](#)
[D. RIYADH 3301](#)

Classified by Ambassador James Oberwetter for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Opportunities abound in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province (EP) for ConGen Dhahran to expand its work with EP residents to help them transform Saudi Arabia's future. Since September 11, EP residents have claimed, and the SAG has tolerated, much greater latitude to discuss the country's and province's problems publicly and to form civil society organizations, albeit informally. This process is indigenous and particularly strong in the Shi'a community, but it also derives strength from the regional atmosphere of reform. Thanks to well-regarded economic and social contributions of Americans in the EP and, in the case of the Shi'a, to the liberation of Iraqi Shi'a from Saddam's rule, many EP institutions and individuals are eager to work with U.S. counterparts. They generally do not seek financial resources; instead, they want to tap the expertise and networks of their U.S. counterparts and to gain implicit support for their projects of transformation. We see particular opportunities in three areas: educational linkages, civil society organizations, and cultural exchanges. End summary.

The Right Time and Place?

[1](#)2. (C) Three features distinguish the EP from other regions of Saudi Arabia: the large Shi'a population, the presence of Saudi Aramco and related industries, and its geographic and cultural proximity to the smaller Gulf countries. These factors make many of the EP's Saudi citizens natural advocates or supporters of transformation, whether political, economic, or social. The Shi'a community sees political and social reform as key to realizing its aspirations that Shi'a be treated fairly and equally as Saudi citizens. The business community sees economic reform as necessary to unlocking the region's full economic potential. All residents are well aware of the rapid changes occurring in neighboring Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the U.A.E.

13. (C) Political and social change is taking place in the EP, albeit at a slower pace than in neighboring Gulf states. The most important changes are the increasing frankness and openness of political discussion and the growing presence of civil society organizations, many of them unofficial (ref D).

Our contacts view these changes as politically significant, emphasizing that enhanced freedom of expression, assembly, and organization are key building blocks to meaningful political reform. On a more purely political front, the Shi'a community in particular is "taking advantage of every opening," as one of its leaders put it, to push for greater freedom of religion, wider support for human rights, and improved accountability of local government. The Shi'a community views the reform process as essential to gaining full rights of citizenship, and its leaders have made a conscious choice to push for reform from within (ref C). The move toward greater debate, a more active civil society, and increased political participation is an indigenous, home-grown process. While its leaders derive strength from political and social changes in the neighboring Gulf states and from regional dialogues about reform, at heart this process is one of EP residents seeking to transform their own future.

14. (C) Many EP residents and organizations are willing or even eager to work with their American counterparts in this process of transformation. This willingness, which runs contrary to conclusions one might draw from opinion polls showing that most Saudis have negative perceptions of the U.S., comes partly from general if sometimes grudging respect for American institutions found throughout the region but also from two factors specific to the EP. First, most EP residents appreciate the role Americans working for Aramco and other companies have played in transforming the region

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economically. Many of the region's professionals and businessmen have direct experience working for or with Americans, giving them a deeper and better understanding of the U.S. Second, the EP's Shi'a community (roughly 40 percent of the EP's Saudi population) appreciates core American values of religious freedom and equality and is much more favorable to U.S. intervention in Iraq and the broader call for regional reform than other Saudis. (Note: The Shi'a community is also more supportive of Hezbollah than the broader Saudi population, and many Shi'a may be reluctant to be involved directly in USG programs while the current Israel-Hezbollah conflict lasts. End note.)

15. (C) Despite the opportunity to support a genuine process of transformation and the willingness of many of those involved to work with U.S. counterparts, practicing transformational diplomacy in the EP involves a delicate balancing act. Many of our contacts wonder if the region and the country at large are currently experiencing a "Prague Spring" and fear that the SAG may roll back the progress made to date. It is clear that there is significant pressure on the SAG from religious conservatives and extremists to stop the process of social and political transformation (ref A), and one of their central arguments is that it represents a western agenda. In addition, some of our contacts question the depth and sincerity of the U.S. commitment to supporting reform in the region and in Saudi Arabia in particular, and fear a return to the trade-off of stability at the expense of democracy. The challenge of practicing transformational diplomacy in the EP is to provide meaningful and enduring support to the indigenous process of transformation without provoking a backlash that will give ammunition to those in the SAG who might want to roll it back.

Target Areas: Education, Civil Society, and Culture

16. (C) We see three areas as particularly promising for practicing transformational diplomacy in the EP: higher

education partnerships, development of civil society, and cultural programs. These areas offer opportunities to support the process of transformation taking place in the EP in ways that draw on U.S. strengths and that are not overtly political.

Education

¶7. (C) Two important changes are occurring in higher education in the EP. Because of the shortage and poor quality of higher education opportunities (ref B), students are rushing to take advantage of the SAG's recently expanded scholarship program for study abroad, particularly in the U.S. Informal networks and organizations have sprung up in the Shi'a community to help students through the many bureaucratic steps, and the interest among Sunnis is high as well. Second, higher education in the EP itself is slowly diversifying. A new private university is scheduled to open this fall, and its investors have hired a U.S. consortium as consultants on the academic program and administration. The Shi'a community is lobbying actively for a new university in Qatif focused on the medical sector, and several smaller, more targeted colleges have also opened in the past several years, as has a branch of the Arab Open University. One of these institutions is explicitly seeking a partnership with a counterpart institution in the U.S., and others would welcome increased programming.

¶8. (C) Both of these processes - the rush of students seeking to study in the U.S. and the gradual diversification of educational opportunities in the EP - offer excellent opportunities for transformational diplomacy. If successful, both processes will transform the EP in the medium and long term, and those involved explicitly view them as transformational. Post can support these processes by facilitating effective matching of Saudi students to U.S. universities and linking of EP colleges and universities with their U.S. counterparts. Because of the recognized excellence of the U.S. in higher education, providing such official support is not overly controversial.

Civil Society

¶9. (C) Civil society in the EP falls roughly into two categories: formal and informal. Formal organizations are

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approved and supported by the government, though they must increasingly rely on their own resources. Examples include established charitable societies and literary clubs, as well as several newer organizations like the EP branch of the National Society for Human Rights. Informal organizations include clubs, regular cultural forums, and online communities. These organizations are newer and their status more tenuous than their formal, established counterparts. They are monitored but tolerated by the SAG, and their organizers are well aware that they have no legal protection. They are growing increasingly dynamic, particularly in Shi'a communities, providing space for public discussion of contentious issues and for forging bonds with others based on shared interests as diverse as women's rights, astronomy, and the arts. If the SAG relaxed its control over civil society and allowed legitimate groups to register, many of these informal organizations would seek to formalize and expand.

¶10. (C) Promoting civil society in the EP is an ideal area for transformational diplomacy; the challenge is that civil society is so sensitive to the SAG that our options are limited. Organizers of unofficial civil society groups, particularly the forums, are often asked by the SAG to cease or tone down their activities. The SAG has sent warning signals to leaders of several groups after ConOff visits, although we remain welcome as visitors to these fora and our hosts are uncowed. Yet even in this environment we have several opportunities to support civil society through IV programs, training for civil society leaders and managers (in

the U.S. or Bahrain, as the SAG may find it too sensitive if done in Saudi Arabia), and visits by U.S. experts to work with specific civil society groups as long as the subject areas are not controversial.

Cultural Programs

¶11. (C) A number of our contacts - particularly intellectuals, writers, and other "opinion shapers" - have told us they would like to see more cultural programming sponsored by post. EP residents, of course, are exposed to American culture through movies, the media, American products, and contact with Americans working in EP businesses. What our contacts want is the opportunity for direct interaction with Americans who are working and creating in the cultural sphere. In the EP, "cultural" is often a byword for political. Seeking to expand opportunities for local cultural expression is in itself a political act, and EP Saudis are also increasingly using "cultural" events as vehicles to raise political issues. We now have the contacts to reach audiences in a variety of venues, from the government-sponsored and recently liberalized literary and artistic clubs to regular but informal cultural gatherings. The challenge will be to select cultural programs that will engage these audiences and implicitly support EP cultural activists, but which do not cross the unwritten line of what is acceptable to the SAG.

----- Conclusion -----

¶12. (C) Education, civil society, and culture are certainly not the only areas where the USG can help EP residents transform their societies, but we think they represent the best opportunities. Other important areas, including women's empowerment and religion (i.e. promoting religious tolerance), can and should be integrated into our activities in these areas, to the extent possible. While it would be feasible and productive to work with women's civil society groups in the EP, for example, we would have to approach the question of religious tolerance much less directly in any EP-based program.

¶13. (C) Over the past year, with the assignment of the first PAO to the Eastern Province in a decade, we have expanded our contact base and our understanding of the indigenous transformational efforts underway in the EP. We have also learned lessons from programming undertaken (though not necessarily in the framework of transformational diplomacy) in the areas of education, civil society, and culture. Based on these experiences, we believe that opportunities abound for practicing transformational diplomacy in the EP, and we look forward to working with Embassy Riyadh and Washington to capitalize on them.

OBERWETTER